

**Statement Of Senator Leahy
On
The FY2021 National Defense Authorization Act
July 23, 2020**

Every year, the Senate considers sweeping legislation to authorize operations of the Department of Defense, and certain functions of the Department of Energy. The Fiscal Year 2021 National Defense Authorization Act provides a roadmap for spending for national defense – spending which reflects over half of the annual federal budget. Its importance is enormous, and its consideration important. Regrettably, the Senate in recent years has reduced consideration of the NDAA to a perfunctory exercise occupying a couple of weeks of debate, and little consideration of amendments. While I support much of what is included in this authorizing package, I cannot support its passage.

I am most concerned that the FY21 NDAA includes authorization for testing of nuclear devices. Where our president fails to lead in global diplomacy and common decency, he seems enthralled with an approach favored by autocrats and dictators – demonstrations of military might over strategic partnerships and alliances. I am concerned that, under this administration, we are inexorably trending toward a new nuclear arms race, where demonstrations of power have taken the place of treaties that made the use of history's most dangerous weapons less likely.

Coupled with authorization to build a new nuclear warhead, the Senate's Fiscal Year 2021 National Defense Authorization Act goes beyond the nuclear modernization plan set in action by the Obama administration in concert with ratifying New START. Rather, it takes scientifically dubious and strategically unnecessary steps to support the President's seemingly exclusive interest in brandishing – literally – our military might. Congress and Presidents of both parties have worked for decades to help the world avoid repeating the precarious situation of the 1960s; I worry we are starting a slow march back to that edge.

Like many Senators, I am disappointed that a simple amendment I have authored to provide resources through the Department of Defense to communities who are the home to significant military missions through our National Guard did not receive consideration. The men and women of our National Guard are members of our communities. They are our mothers and fathers, our husbands and wives, our coworkers and neighbors. The important missions they serve help not only our communities, but our national defense. The Department of Defense should not only support the men and women who serve in uniform, but also the communities in which they partner. This simple, straightforward amendment would have provided \$20 million for the Department of Defense to support multiple communities where certain military missions that serve the national defense are based. As communities across the country support our military's missions, so, too, should our Department of Defense serve their needs.

I am also disappointed that the Senate has rejected an amendment to rein in the dramatically escalating budget of the Department of Defense. As the Vice Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, I have worked with the Republican leadership and with Chairman Shelby in recent years to strike budget agreements that have resulted in parity between defense and non-defense spending. At the same time, amid a national and international public health

crisis, the time has never been more critical to infuse more resources in public health, education, and business development programs. The Sanders amendment would have maintained full support for the personnel needs of the Department, as well as the critical medical research supported through the Department of Defense. It would, however, have also taken some of the Department's sweeping budget and reserved it for underfunded domestic needs. This is long overdue.

The Senate will pass this bill today, and we will need to reconcile differences with the House. While I will not vote for the Senate bill as it currently stands, there are many provisions that merit support. The bill continues a streak in recent years of improving support for the health and safety of military servicemembers and their families, and this year also authorizes \$44 million for vaccine and biotech research support for COVID-19 response that benefits everyone. The bill includes limitations on the use of the military against protestors, following the administration's actions against protestors in the Nation's Capitol, and the photo-op that followed. It includes a provision to begin the process for renaming U.S. military facilities named after Confederate generals. Our bases today should reflect the foundational belief that we are all created equal, not glorify those who sought to perpetuate slavery and destroy the Union.

I am also very pleased that a project I have worked on many years to heal the wounds of the Vietnam War has been advanced. Over the last two years, we have included an authorization and the Appropriations Committee has funded a project to remediate dioxin contamination at the Bien Hoa Airbase. This year we also include an authorization for a partnership with the Vietnamese government for recovering remains of missing in action in Vietnam. For more than 40 years, the Vietnamese government has provided indispensable assistance in locating the remains of more than 700 U.S. MIAs. This provision will enable the Department of Defense to reciprocate by providing archival data and other assistance to Vietnam. I want to thank Senators Hirono and Kaine for their help in sponsoring this amendment in committee, and Chairman Inhofe and Ranking Member Reed for accepting it.

I hope that an agreed upon Fiscal Year 2021 National Defense Authorization Act will address these concerns. While I cannot vote to pass this bill today, I hope to be able to support a conference agreement that supports our men and women in uniform and their families, meets the defense needs of our nation, and reflects the values that have made American the beacon of hope for generations.

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